

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY  
 INTERVIEW WITH TIM RUSSERT ON NBC-TV PROGRAM, "MEET THE PRESS," WITH  
 BOB WOODWARD AND ED RABEL  
 WASHINGTON, D.C.  
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MR. RUSSERT: Mr. Secretary, welcome to "Meet the Press."

SEC. PERRY: Thank you, Tim.

MR. RUSSERT: You just heard Tom Brokaw's interview with the Bosnian prime minister and with the U.N. commander on the ground. There were two requests there, as I heard them. The Bosnian prime minister said, "Please, let's resume air strikes." As you know, Prijedor, the town of Prijedor is under siege today. Gorazde is under siege. Will the United States contemplate air strikes?

SEC. PERRY: We already are providing substantial air support over there, but it's limited to three particular areas. The first is we are using our Air Force to prevent any aerial bombardment. We have continued to do that. We're using it to prevent artillery bombardment of Sarajevo, and we'll continue to do that, and we're using it to provide close air support for the relief convoys, as needed. So there's a substantial use of airpower in Bosnia today. We're not looking at extensions of the use of that air power today, but you could conceive of another situation like Sarajevo arising where we might consider it.

MR. RUSSERT: In the next few days, however, without the entrance of military action or else strikes, it looks like Prijedor and Gorazde will fall to the Serbians. Are we willing to accept that?

SEC. PERRY: We're not really entering this war; we're not participating in the war. Our objective over there is to accelerate the peace, and we have very vigorous efforts to make that happen and to mitigate the suffering, mitigate the violence while that's going on, and we have perhaps 10,000 military forces involved in those objectives right now. This is a substantial effort.

MR. RUSSERT: But if Prijedor and Gorazde fell to the Serbians, that would be acceptable to us, or we'll do nothing to stop it?

SEC. PERRY: We will not enter the war to stop that from happening. That is correct.  
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MR. RUSSERT: You heard Lieutenant General Michael Rose from Britain, who is the commander of the U.N. forces on the ground, say that if America committed troops, it would accelerate and help peace. Do you agree?

SEC. PERRY: Well, we have committed already, as I said, 10,000 troops --

MR. RUSSERT: But there are no troops on the ground. No American troops on the ground.

SEC. PERRY: We have troops on the ground in Macedonia, not in Bosnia. We are prepared to send a substantial number of troops to sustain a peace agreement once a peace agreement is reached, but we're not prepared to send troops in in the meantime, ground troops.

MR. RUSSERT: The president had said at one time that we would send about 25,000 American troops if there was a peace treaty arrived at. Is that still our commitment?

SEC. PERRY: The commitment is not tied to a number, Tim. The commitment will be tied to whatever it takes to sustain the peace plan. That 25,000 number was tied to a much earlier peace plan, so when the new peace plan is reached, we'll have to estimate how many total troops it will take. Our commitment on that is to support a NATO force going in to do that. We would expect to have fewer than half of the total. If the total was, say, 40,000, then we would have something under 20,000 troops there. We don't know at this time what the total's going to be.

MR. RUSSERT: During the campaign, you know, Governor Clinton expressed moral indignation about the Bush policy towards Bosnia, and he promised that he would not stand by and let Bosnia fall to the Serbs, and yet tonight -- today as we talk, tonight in Bosnia -- two more towns are about to be overrun by the Serbs, you have heard the U.N. commander plead for American troops in support, and our government has pretty much turned a deaf ear.

SEC. PERRY: General Rose is pleading for troops not to fight the Serbs, not to stop this -- not to enter the war on the side of the Muslims. The troops, the U.N. troops over there are guarding the convoys, they're providing peacekeeping forces. They're not fighting the war. No matter how many U.N. troops we had there, we would not be engaged in fighting the Serbs and trying to win a war.

MR. RUSSERT: Thursday at the United Nations, the U.S. balked at providing another \$100 million to provide money for the resources to send other countries' troops to Bosnia.

SEC. PERRY: Mmm-hmm. (Acknowledgement.)

MR. RUSSERT: Is that still our policy, and why?

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SEC. PERRY: Well, we put up about 30 percent of the -- a little more than 30 percent of the costs of the U.N. peacekeeping forces, and therefore we have some substantial interest, some substantial say, in that. We are trying to hold down the total costs involved here, and that was the basic rationale behind that judgment.

MR. RUSSERT: And we will stand by that?

SEC. PERRY: Yes, we will stand by that.

MR. RUSSERT: Let's turn to Korea.

SEC. PERRY: All right.

MR. RUSSERT: Will the United States allow North Korea to build a nuclear bomb?

SEC. PERRY: We have -- let me first of all comment that North Korea itself has said that it wants to have a non-nuclear Korean peninsula. We want the same thing. So we're working diplomatically at this time to try to achieve that objective and to try to have North Korea live up to their own commitments. So we and North Korea presumably have the same objective on that regard, and now we're trying to see what can be done to make that -- make them live up to that commitment.

MR. RUSSERT: Does North Korea already have a nuclear bomb?

SEC. PERRY: We don't know for sure. Our estimate, Mr. Woolsey's estimate, is that it's possible --

MR. RUSSERT: He's the director of the CIA.

SEC. PERRY: The director of the CIA estimates that they might have one, possibly two bombs at this time.

The issue at this time is not tied directly on whether they have one or one and a half or two bombs, it is whether they will stop the nuclear program they now have under way. That is the overriding question we're facing today. They are embarked on a program of development which could get them a dozen or more bombs a year. That's what we're trying to stop right now.

MR. RUSSERT: But it's interesting, because on November 7th, on this program, I asked President Clinton the very same question I just asked you.

(From videotape.) Will you allow North Korea to build a nuclear bomb?

PRESIDENT CLINTON: (From videotape.) North Korea cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear bomb. We have to be very firm about it.

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This is a difficult moment in our relationship with them, and I think a difficult moment for them. They are one of the most -- perhaps the most -- isolated country in the world.

MR. RUSSERT: What the president said is we will not allow North Korea to develop a nuclear bomb, we have to be very firm about it. And now you're saying there's a very good case to be made, in a sense, in our intelligence community, they already have the bomb. Will we take it away?

SEC. PERRY: Our first objective is to freeze the program, to stop the program where it is now. That is by all odds our greatest concern. At such time as we succeed at that, then we can be concerned about rolling back the program they have. The agreement which they made with South Korea does envision removing that bomb they already have, if they have one, and it also envisions a way of verifying that that is done.

MR. RUSSERT: Now, "The Washington Post" reported yesterday while we've been negotiating with the North Koreans -- some would say dithering with the North Koreans -- they have produced a second plutonium processing line and NBC News' Ed Rabel here has reported that within two years, they'll have a third, which could create -- which would be 25 times as large. So while the discussions are going on, is it your judgment the North Koreans are continuing to proceed with their development of nuclear devices?

SEC. PERRY: Yes. That is my judgment, and we're very much concerned about that.

Let me point out, Tim, that we have really several alternative ways which we can deal with that. The first is that we can simply acquiesce in the North Korean nuclear program because of the risks that are involved in standing firm against it. I reject that, the president has rejected that, and we reject that because whatever dangers there are in standing up to them now, those dangers are going to be compounded two or three years from now when this plan is finished and they're starting -- and they're producing bombs at the rate of a dozen a year.

The second alternative is to take a military strike -- go out and try to take that plant out, which I believe we can do. I also reject that alternative, and I reject that because it has a high risk of provoking a war -- a war which we could win, but a war which would be catastrophic.

And that takes us to the third alternative, which is the one we are pursuing, and that is imaginative and aggressive diplomatic actions as long as there's any hope for those actions. We don't have to have results this week or next week. The problems we're concerned about will take a year or two to unfold, so we can be firm, but we can be patient, too.

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Now, if we run out of hope on those diplomatic actions, if there's no hope for them, then we'd have to start putting pressure, and that gets us into a higher risk area, and as we get into that higher risk area, we have to be prepared to defend ourselves. We have to take prudent, defensive measures.

MR. RUSSERT: Bob?

MR. WOODWARD: Could that -- in a way, isn't that hope kind of a fantasy? You have an isolated, closed, authoritarian regime, and essentially we have a policy of saying, "You don't get to have nuclear weapons, but we can and other countries in the world can." How is that going to be effective with the North Koreans?

SEC. PERRY: Well, Bob, I would point out, first of all, they have already agreed not to have nuclear weapons --

MR. WOODWARD: But you just said they do.

SEC. PERRY: Yes, they have stated an objective of a Korean -- of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula. They see that to their advantage, as well as to the South Korean and our advantage. Our objective is to try to make that commitment come true.

MR. WOODWARD: But, sir, you know they're lying about that, right?

SEC. PERRY: I know they're lying when they say they're not developing a nuclear program. I do not know they're lying in saying -- they might conceive, they could very well conceive, that having a nuclear-free peninsula would be to their advantage.

MR. WOODWARD: What does President Clinton say to you, sir, that he wants achieved here that is really practically achievable?

SEC. PERRY: The first is to freeze this nuclear program. It doesn't have to be today or this week, but freeze it soon; we're talking about months, not years from now. And the second is roll it back. To the extent they actually have one or two nuclear bombs now, we want those to be removed. That's a very clear objective. It's going to be very difficult to achieve it, but it's easy to state it.

MR. WOODWARD: How serious is this situation, really? Are we on the brink of war? Is there a kind of a war fever building here, or is this something that is not going to be a problem for six months or a year?

SEC. PERRY: No, we're not on the brink of war. This is not an imminent crisis, and I don't believe a war is going to result from it. Certainly the United States is not going to initiate a war, and I believe that North Korea, looking at the catastrophe that would occur to their country if they initiated a war, is not going to, either.

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But we must be very clear about how we are standing firm on this so there is no misunderstanding on their part, there's no possibility for confusion that could lead them to take actions, military actions, like they did in the first Korean War because they underestimated our intentions.

MR. RABEL: What's the real quality of our intelligence there in North Korea?

SEC. PERRY: In terms of their order of battle, how many troops they have, how many artillery, how many airplanes, it's very good. We know that very well, indeed. In terms of the relative state of readiness of their forces, we know that very well. In terms of the intentions, what's in Kim Il-Sung's mind, we have no idea.

MR. RABEL: Well, Mr. Secretary, that goes right to the point of the question of negotiating with people that you have said basically are irrational and, on the 25th of March, you told us reporters at the Pentagon that you have very limited knowledge of what drives the thinking of the leadership in the North Korean government, what's likely to cause them to respond in a positive way, what's likely to cause them to respond in a negative one, in a backlash way.

So, therefore, if it's found that they, indeed, without doubt, have nuclear weapons, would you rule out under all circumstances -- because you might save the lives of Americans in South Korea, would you rule out under all circumstances a preemptive strike?

SEC. PERRY: I would not rule anything out or anything in. I would say at this time, under these circumstances, I would rule it out.

MR. RABEL: What about the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons, if it would save American lives? There are 65,000 U.S. dependents and 36,000 troops on the ground in South Korea. If it could be shown that a preemptive strike would avoid the 400,000 deaths that are predicted if the North Koreans were to strike by lightning strike against the South, would you use nuclear weapons?

SEC. PERRY: I can't envision the circumstances in which the use of nuclear weapons would be reasonable or prudent military action.

MR. RABEL: Ballistic missiles -- also a big problem. The North Koreans have Scud missiles. They've been selling them to the Iranians, they're proliferators. How far along are they with their ballistic missile program? We hear they are developing a ballistic missile that would travel more than 2,100 miles -- would threaten Guam, would threaten Tokyo. Just how far along are they, and can they couple this already with a nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons?

SEC. PERRY: They have a short- to medium-range ballistic missile already developed, already operational. The intermediate-range

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ballistic missile which you're describing is in the early stages of development. I don't know how many years it will take them to have that operational, but it's certainly several years away.

MR. RABEL: A final question from me in this particular segment, sir, and that is, when we rely on China, when we play the China card -- and we know you have ample evidence that the Chinese are suspected of participating in the North Korean missile program and ballistic missile program; they also are proliferators -- aren't we turning over diplomatic leadership to the Chinese?

SEC. PERRY: I don't believe that the Chinese are active participants in either the nuclear program or the ballistic missile program of the North Koreans. In early years, there might have been some benefit come from the Chinese. I do not believe they're active participants in the program. I also believe that the Chinese do not want North Korea to have a nuclear weapon program. So I have a different set of assumptions and beliefs about the Chinese interest and involvement in this than suggested by your question, Ed.

MR. RABEL: What do you think their interest is?

SEC. PERRY: I think their interest is for a peaceful, stable Korean peninsula. They have a substantial amount of trade with South Korea, for example, and so a war in the Korean peninsula would be very detrimental to their economics. I think China is pointed towards economic development, and they have -- their economic development is one of the real success stories in Asia today, and I think they're going to continue to make that their primary emphasis, and any major military instability, any war certainly on that Korean peninsula would be adverse to their interests.

MR. RUSSERT: Mr. Secretary, it's now April, and you said you hoped to have resolved this situation in months, not years. If by the end of this year, North Korea is continuing to develop and process plutonium in its nuclear weapons program -- in other words, the situation now is the same six months from now, our policy will not have succeeded.

SEC. PERRY: If that is the case six months from now, we will be, I believe, in a -- out of the diplomatic mode and into the mode of putting pressures, and substantial pressures, on North Korea, and we would have said -- I would say then, at that point, that our diplomatic approach would not have succeeded, but that's not the last move we have to make.

MR. RUSSERT: Pressures meaning economic sanctions?

SEC. PERRY: A whole range of pressures, beginning with economic sanctions.

MR. RUSSERT: What about the joint military exercises, Team Spirit? Is that canceled, or has that been put back on?

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SEC. PERRY: We are planning today and we were discussing today with the South Korean government a new schedule for the Team Spirit.

MR. RUSSERT: Bottom line on this, Mr. Secretary -- the American people who are watching this morning, in the end, you and the president have to make a decision. Is it worth expending American lives to prevent North Korea from developing a nuclear bomb?

SEC. PERRY: We do not want and will not provoke a war over this or any other issue in Korea, but we will take a very firm stand and very strong actions. It's conceivable that those actions might provoke the North Koreans into unleashing a war, and that is a risk that we're taking, and we compare that with the risk of letting them develop the bomb and look at the various problems that could cause us not only on the Korean peninsula, but the possibility of their proliferating this bomb to the Mideast, where they're now selling their missiles, this is a matter of very, very great concern to us.

MR. RUSSERT: And if our actions triggered a North Korean response, unleashed a war, as you described it, how catastrophic, how serious would that war be? What should the American people be prepared for?

SEC. PERRY: Well, first of all, Tim, I wouldn't expect that the response of North Korea is going to be a war. They can take terrorist actions, they can take military harassing actions. There are a whole set of things that they can do which would cause us and South Korea problems. That's the first thing we need to worry about. The last -- and I don't think it's really appropriate at this time to be talking about a war. We're not thinking about a war. I don't believe they're thinking about a war. I think that's really not on anybody's planning horizon at this point.

MR. RUSSERT: Mr. Secretary, we have to take a break. We'll be right back to talk about Russia.

MR. RUSSERT: We're back with the secretary of defense, William Perry.

Mr. Secretary, before we turn to Russia, let me just ask you one follow-up question, final question on Korea. As the North Koreans are sitting there watching this program today, and they say, "Well, here's



Secretary of Defense Perry saying there won't be a preemptive strike and the United States is probably unwilling to risk a war to stop us from developing nuclear bomb; why should we stop?"

SEC. PERRY: Tim, let me be clear about what I said. I said I -- we will not have a preemptive military strike at this time and under these circumstances. I am not ruling that option out in the future.

Secondly, I said we would not initiate a war with North Korea. We are prepared to -- and while we are pursuing diplomatic options and pursuing them vigorously now, if those fail, if those fail we are prepared to put considerable pressure on. And that will risk -- that will increase the risk, there's no doubt about that, and because it will increase the risk, we will increase our defensive forces as needed to prudently protect ourselves against that risk.

MR. RUSSERT: Let's turn to Russia. There have been contradictory comments made over the last few days about whether Russia will join NATO's Partnership for Peace. Where does it stand? Will Russia join?

SEC. PERRY: I believe they will. Defense Minister Grachev, when I met with him two weeks ago, told me they would join. Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, when I met with him, told me they would join. The foreign minister is scheduling a visit to Brussels in two weeks to turn in their application papers. So I -- yes, I believe they will join.

MR. RUSSERT: There are reports today in "The New York Times" that the Russians would like us to alter an agreement they signed in 1990 which would allow them to keep more Russian troops on their northern and southern borders to watch over the republics associated in the former Soviet Union. Will we make an alteration in the 1990 agreement.

SEC. PERRY: The "we" in this case involves a whole host of nations of which the United States is just one and the countries most directly affected by that agreement are the countries on the northern

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and southern flanks in Europe. I have talked with the leaders of those countries. They seem very uninterested and unwilling to make that change. So I cannot -- I do not expect a change in the treaty which limits the Russians that way. I think this is going to be a big problem if they insist on it.

MR. RUSSERT: On the front page, Michael Gordon writes today, and he poses a question in "The Times" there's a debate whether is a partner that Washington can work things out with or whether or not it's a military power that simply wants to intimidate its neighbors. What do you think?

SEC. PERRY: I think we are working closely with Russia, will continue to work with them, and it's been pretty successful so far. Russia has an enormous set of economic, social, and political problems it is facing as it goes through what basically is a revolution in their country.

I think if you argue that the most significant event in the last decade was the collapse of the Soviet empire, then the most significant event in the next decade, if it happens, will be the failure of reform, the failure of this change that you're trying to make right now. And the country is in turmoil. It's a very difficult situation.

MR. RUSSERT: What is its current military strength and military situation in terms of troops on the ground, nuclear weapons? How much risk do they still pose? And how much of the last 10 years undone their military capability?

SEC. PERRY: Russia has about 1-1/2 million men in their army today compared to about five million men in the Red Army in the Soviet Union. So there's a dramatic reduction. Their number of weapons are way down. Corresponding to that, the readiness of the forces is very poor. On the other hand, they still have 25,000 or so nuclear weapons. So they're very, very much a nuclear power of enormous consequence.

MR. RUSSERT: Bob?

MR. WOODWARD: With the president as commander-in-chief, you as secretary of defense, you are more or less deputy commander-in-chief. You are in the most important chain of command in the world, perhaps. Take a moment and tell us about your relationship with President Clinton, what you talk about. Does he understand the issues? Does he give you instructions? Do you talk to him often?

SEC. PERRY: We talk several times a week on national security issues. And we talk about every national security issue we've talked about on this program and more -- on Korea, on Russia, on Bosnia, on Somalia, all of those. He is very deeply involved, very deeply interested, and has a very deep understanding of all the issues we've talked about, and gives his policy team, including myself, very clear guidance on how to proceed.

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